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ABSTRACT

As the inclusion movement integrates students with disabilities into community situations, these students become more vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and manipulation. This paper compares rural and urban teachers' provision of contemporary issues education to special education students and describes the development of Web-based supports to facilitate such education, particularly in rural areas. A survey was completed by 102 rural and urban special educators and urban general educators in Arizona. About 60 percent of rural special educators addressed each of the following topics with their students: attitudes toward disabilities, tobacco use, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, and alcohol abuse. Among urban special educators, 81 percent addressed attitudes toward disabilities, and 50-57 percent addressed racism, tobacco use, and drug abuse. The items least discussed by both rural and urban teachers all involved sexuality or sexual abuse. Barriers to contemporary issues education in rural schools included conservative community standards, lack of time, and teacher concerns about students' level of understanding. Both rural and urban educators felt that such education would be facilitated by more and better materials and district guidelines or permission. Based on survey findings, a Web site is being developed to provide developmentally appropriate resources for contemporary issues education. Survey response data on 19 high risk items are included. (SV)

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CONTEMPORARY ISSUES EDUCATION: RURAL PERSPECTIVES AND RESOURCES

In 1995, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development concluded that "By age 17, about a quarter of all adolescents have engaged in behaviors that are harmful or dangerous to themselves or others: getting pregnant, using drugs, taking part in antisocial activity, and failing at school. Nearly half of American adolescents are at high or moderate risk of seriously damaging their life chances." (Carnegie, 1995). As the availability of drugs and guns grows easier, as families are broken and reblended, as the majority of school children grapple with unsupervised latchkey experiences, and as supportive resources become more scarce, there seem to be more icebergs and fewer life boats for even the most able and advantaged students. What happens to the students with disabilities?

As the inclusion movement continues to integrate students with disabilities into communities, these students are placed more often into a variety of vulnerable situations in which they may be exploited and manipulated. Youth with disabilities are struggling with topics such as teenage pregnancy, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, child abuse, rape, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, gang activity and delinquency, racism, abortion, domestic violence, and tobacco use. These youths are particularly susceptible to dangerous outcomes associated with these contemporary issues. Given the enormous numbers of special education students in mainstreamed settings and the costs of the social, legal, medical, and personal outcomes of their victimization, the question of risk reduction is of vital importance. How can the risks associated with contemporary issues be reduced for students with disabilities?

In this paper, we will explore the education of students with disabilities in terms of these contemporary issues. We will focus on:

(1) A summary of some of the efforts and experiences reported by rural and urban classroom teachers in addressing these risks and issues, and
(2) An overview of the development of web-based supports that can facilitate teacher, parent, and community efforts (particularly in rural areas) to address contemporary issues education in the future.

The extent to which public schools provide risk reduction for students through prevention and protection programs varies across communities. Research indicates that even when schools do provide risk-reduction programs, many students in special education are excluded. For example, several studies that describe the substance abuse epidemic point out that students with disabilities are frequently excluded from available drug abuse prevention programs. A National School Boards Association study reported similar findings in the area of HIV-prevention education. This study indicated that fewer than 25% of students with autism received HIV-prevention education and fewer than 50% of students with emotional disturbance or mental retardation received such instruction (National School Boards Association, 1990). Significant numbers of students with disabilities are excluded from discussions of extremely important controversial issues in the classroom.

In spite of how parents, teachers, or administrators may personally feel about topics such as teen sex, abortion, gangs, child abuse, suicide, or drugs, special education students are struggling to contend with these issues often without the necessary information and support. To investigate the role of special education teachers in this area, we (Lamorey & Leigh, 1996; Leigh & Lamorey, 1996; Leigh, Huntze, & Lamorey, 1995) explored the extent to which special education teachers addressed various contemporary issues with a variety of special education students.

Through the use of a survey instrument, we gathered information regarding the extent to which 45 contemporary issues were addressed by special education and general education teachers across Missouri and

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Arizona. The purpose of the survey was descriptive in nature, that is, to investigate the extent to which teachers address a range of contemporary issues and to elicit teacher comments regarding obstacles and needs relative to contemporary issues education. Development of the survey is discussed in more detail by Leigh, Huntze, and Lamorey (1995).

In completing the survey, teachers of students with learning disabilities, teachers of students with mental retardation, and teachers of students with behavioral disorders were asked to rate each item on a scale according to the extent to which they addressed the topics with their students. For example, a rating of 1 indicated that the teacher did not address the topic with a majority of students, a rating of 2 indicated that the teacher addressed the topic to a very limited extent, a rating of 3 indicated that the topic was addressed to some extent, and a rating of 4 indicated that the teacher addressed the topic fully and completely.

The results of the survey were rich in content as teachers took a considerable amount of time to include written responses regarding their roles, responsibilities, and perceptions of needs in contemporary issues education. It was evident that most special education teachers did not address these topics to much extent. On average, even the topics with the highest ratings were addressed only "to some extent" (a rating of 3 on the scale). The most commonly addressed topics were "attitudes towards disabilities", "tobacco use", "drug use" and "moral and ethical values". In fact, more than half of the topics received item mean ratings of less than 2.0 from teachers of students with LD as well as from teachers in the MR area meaning that in general they were covered in a very limited manner. It was also evident in teachers' narrative responses that they had very strong feelings about the restrictions they experienced in addressing student needs relative to these issues. Teachers reported feeling constrained by time, lack of materials and resources, lack of support from administrators, and a sense that there was little community support for providing information about these sensitive issues.

In light of the information and insights gleaned from the first survey study, a second study was conducted to learn more about the needs of teachers and their communities as well as to learn about the obstacles, resources, and successes that were significant for teachers of students with special needs. The original survey was expanded to include questions about (1) teacher's perceptions of the locus of responsibility relative to the parents' role versus the school's role in discussing these topics with students, (2) teacher needs in curriculum development relative to contemporary topics, (3) teacher resources relative to these topics, and (4) teacher willingness to address these topics with their students. Copies of this survey were mailed to principals of over 150 high schools in Arizona with instructions to distribute the surveys to teachers of students with LD, with BED, with MR, and teachers of typical learners. Responses were received from 102 Arizona teachers. Arizona respondents included 39 teachers of students with LD, 20 teachers of students with MR, 10 teachers of students with BED, 11 teachers of cross-categorical classrooms, and 22 teachers of typical learners.

The first analysis of the Arizona data focused on the differences between rural special educators, urban special educators, and urban general educators. For this analysis, 19 of the most high risk categories were chosen for comparisons, and the percentage of responses for ratings of 3 and 4 were combined to determine an indicator of the extent to which each contemporary issue was addressed by the various groups of educators. Results according to the five most frequently addressed issues and the five least frequently addressed are indicated below and the expanded results are shown in Table 1. These items are organized according to the percentage of teacher-respondents who reported that they addressed these topics "at least to some extent."

Top Five Items Discussed By Teachers

Urban educators of typical students:	Urban educators of students w/disabilities	Rural educators of students w/disabilities
drug abuse (86%),	attitudes re disabilities (81%)	attitudes re disabilities (60%)
tobacco use (73%),	racism (57%)	tobacco use (60%)
racism (73%),	tobacco use (53%)	teen pregnancy (59%)
teen pregnancy (69%),	drug abuse (50%)	drug abuse (59%)
attitudes re disabilities (69%)	domestic violence (37%)	alcohol abuse (59%)

Five Items Least Discussed By Teachers

Urban educators of typical students:	Urban educators of students w/disabilities	Rural educators of students w/disabilities
homosexuality (10%)	abortion (4%)	homosexuality (15%)
abortion (27%)	homosexuality (9%)	rape (18%)
rape (32%)	rape (11%)	child abuse (sexual) (18%)
child abuse (sexual) (41%)	sexual promiscuity (15%)	abortion (18%)
sexual promiscuity (41%)	child abuse (sexual) (18%)	sexual promiscuity (27%)

In general, the urban educators of typical students addressed these high risk contemporary issues to a greater extent than did the special educators. Furthermore, in all but two categories, more of the rural special educators addressed the high risk issues than did the urban special educators. According to Table 1, in nine of the 19 high risk categories, 10% to 24% more rural special educators addressed high risk issues than did urban special educators.

It is interesting to note that the rural special educators were more often providing contemporary issues education to students as compared to urban educators as often the rural communities are portrayed as more conservative environments wherein families are considered self-sufficient. In the narratives provided by teachers, the rural teachers often noted that they felt bound by community standards and school board policy to avoid controversial issues at all costs. As teachers wrote: "In the district I work for most of these issues are considered the responsibility of the family and we are encouraged not to talk about them in class." "Our school has ruled on some of these topics and does not permit them." "I would be fired in a nanosecond if I touched any of these issues." Thirty-nine percent of the comments by rural educators concerning barriers to discussing contemporary issues focused on the obstacle of conservative community standards/school officials. Twenty-seven percent of the rural educators' comments regarding obstacles focused on the lack of time and 14% of the rural educators' comments reflected teacher concerns about the students' ability levels relative to the perceived complexity of some of the high risk issues.

Urban special educators did not address these contemporary issues as frequently as their rural counterparts. Obstacles noted by urban educators included lack of time (24%), lack of materials (19%), community standards/officials (15%) and parental resistance (12%). The lack of materials was significant for the urban educators, but negligible for the rural educators. Very few educators from either rural or urban settings indicated that a lack of training prohibited them from addressing contemporary issues.

Changes that urban educators felt would facilitate their involvement in teaching contemporary issues included more and better materials (51%), a district requirement that the material be taught (8%), and better leadership (6%). Rural educators indicated that the following changes would enhance their ability to teach contemporary issues: district guidelines/permission (25%), appropriate materials (22%), a coalition of community agencies involved in teaching these issues (15%), and more freedom (6%).

If it is to occur meaningfully, contemporary issues education must involve a shared commitment among educators, parents, and others in the community. Generally, teachers reported that they were willing and able to provide contemporary issues education for students with disabilities if they had the support, time, guidelines, and materials to do the job. One of the major outcomes of these survey studies is the on-going development of a very new web-based resource for teachers, parents, and communities to use in addressing contemporary issues education. Resources have been collected from a diverse variety of information sources and will be available for schools to begin to develop meaningful materials which can be adapted for a variety of settings, a variety of student learning styles, and which can be used in modular form for a variety of district requirements. This site will be available for teachers to share materials that are available at developmentally appropriate ages using a variety of teaching styles and strategies. Parents as well as other community members will be able to refer to the materials, and to collaborate with schools in making selections that reflect community-values. Updates can be provided to keep materials current. Names and locations of community-based, regional, and national agencies and groups will be available. Media resources can be listed and described. The development and description of this site will be the focus of the presentation, and input from conference attendees is excitedly anticipated.

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Table 1. High Risk Items Ranked By Teacher Categories

Q# 3 Tobacco Use

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	6	33	36	24
Disabled Urban	15	33	33	20
Typical Urban	0	27	23	50

Q# 4 Racism

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	18	30	36	15
Disabled Urban	15	28	37	20
Typical Urban	5	18	64	14

Q# 9 Homosexuality

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	55	30	15	0
Disabled Urban	50	41	9	0
Typical Urban	68	23	5	5

Q# 14 Domestic Violence

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	19	43	25	13
Disabled Urban	33	30	28	9
Typical Urban	18	27	32	23

Q# 18 Suicide

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	38	28	31	3
Disabled Urban	35	46	13	7
Typical Urban	18	27	27	27

Q# 19 AIDS/HIV

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	27	33	21	18
Disabled Urban	26	44	20	11
Typical Urban	14	32	27	27

Q# 23 Teenage Pregnancy

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	27	12	27	32
Disabled Urban	24	41	26	9
Typical Urban	9	23	23	46

Q# 27 Divorce

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	41	28	16	16
Disabled Urban	33	48	15	4
Typical Urban	23	27	27	23

Q#28 Attitudes toward people with disabilities

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	12	27	33	27
Disabled Urban	4	15	37	44
Typical Urban	5	27	23	46

Q# 30 Gang activity

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	24	36	30	9
Disabled Urban	20	50	22	9
Typical Urban	14	23	27	36

Table 1. High Risk Items Ranked By Teacher Categories (continued)

Q# 31 Safe sex

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	30	33	24	12
Disabled Urban	37	44	13	7
Typical Urban	32	17	17	41

Q#32 Alcohol abuse

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	12	27	32	27
Disabled Urban	11	44	32	11
Typical Urban	9	23	18	50

Q#34 General sex education

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	34	31	16	19
Disabled Urban	47	29	18	7
Typical Urban	27	23	23	27

Q# 35 Drug use

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	18	18	24	35
Disabled Urban	17	33	35	15
Typical Urban	0	14	36	50

Q# 36 Sexual promiscuity

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	33	39	18	9
Disabled Urban	41	44	11	4
Typical Urban	18	41	18	23

Q#38 Rape

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	49	33	15	3
Disabled Urban	44	46	11	0
Typical Urban	41	27	18	14

Q#41 Abortion

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	52	30	15	3
Disabled Urban	59	37	4	0
Typical Urban	59	14	27	0

Q#42 Child abuse in the form of physical violence

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	24	41	24	9
Disabled Urban	28	44	24	4
Typical Urban	14	36	23	27

Q#43 Child abuse in the form of sexual behavior including incest

	% of #1 responses	% of #2 responses	% of #3 responses	% of #4 responses
Disabled Rural	38	44	12	6
Disabled Urban	42	40	11	7
Typical Urban	27	32	18	23